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SUCKER—1936 MODEL

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The author wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Consumers' Research Incorporated, from whose non-confidential service the examples used below have been drawn.

"Satan," said Jeff Peters, "is a hard boss to work for. When other people are having their vacations is when he keeps you the busiest. He always finds somebody for idle hands to 'do'."

"Andy Tucker was the most talented conniver at strategems I ever saw. Whenever he saw a dollar in another man's hands he took it as a personal grudge, if he couldn't take it any other way."

"I never skin a 'sucker' without admiring the prismatic beauty of his scales."

—*The Gentle Grafter.*

To paraphrase O. Henry, the consumer is the typical modern "Rube." You could sell him the Court House or Buckeye Lake if you advertised them enough. A little knowledge seems to be a deadly thing. Teach the consumer to read large print, and he'll believe everything he sees in the ads. It's my belief we ought to have a "Closed Season on Consumers" to make the business man's hunting a bit more of a sporting proposition.

Take Aspirin, for example—or better still, don't take it. The American Medical Association says the use of Aspirin does *not* help to cure a cold. Furthermore, the indiscriminate use of Aspirin has proven harmful to many persons and has had fatal results in a few cases. Finally, most brands of Aspirin are of pharmacopoeial standard, even though B—r Aspirin says "The only genuine Aspirin . . . always safe . . . can't hurt anybody"

In the dentifrice field I might say, in the words of one advertiser, "Four out of five believe it" P-ps-d-nt advertises "Film *must* be removed from teeth," yet there is evidence to show that the film may be a much needed protective covering for the teeth. However, if you insist on removing film, a sure-fire and permanent method would involve the internal use of a tube of P-b-c- which contains sufficient poison to kill several adults outright. Perhaps you merely wish to "save as much as \$3 a year" but note that a comparison of five popular brands showed that only two were more expensive *per ounce of paste* than L-st-r-n-. Do you fear "acid mouth?" If so, it's just too bad, for every normal mouth shows an acid reaction which no mouth-wash can correct for more than a few minutes at a time.

Have you a sore throat? A cut finger? Athlete's foot? Then beware of L-st-r-n-, P-ps-d-nt, -nt-s-pt-c, and -bs-rb-n- J-n-r, for germs accidentally introduced into the bottles at the factories have been known to thrive and multiply happily in these "antiseptics" while en route to the shelves of the corner drug store. It's a mighty good

thing that the average man recovers from most diseases and minor injuries in spite of the stuff he takes to "cure" himself. Otherwise many manufacturers would have no market for their goods, for their customers would die off too fast to buy another bottle.

We've spent enough time at the drug counter. Let's cross the aisle for a bit to shop for other goods. Here are typewriter ribbons, for example. Surely it makes no difference which brand we buy of such a standardized product, but wait a moment. A recent test of 30 brands showed some significant differences in the "life expectancy" of ribbons. Thus the H-r-l-d Sq-r- brand sold by the F. W. Woolworth and Company 10-cent stores would write 77,500 words per dollar's worth of ribbon, while the -d-l brand sold by The Carters Ink Company was good for only 1,143 words per dollar of ribbon. Although the former sold at 20 cents per ribbon and the latter at \$1.25, the former was really about 70 times the better buy.

When you buy a mechanical refrigerator, will a gadget get you, or will the real worth of the refrigerator determine your choice? For the gadget lovers, the recent models offer covered "crystal" dishes (glass, to you), combination ice-tray releases and bottle openers, or a "rearranging shelf." For the seeker after real worth, claims of "the highest possible quality," "uses less electricity," or "the safest, most efficient unit ever devised" are subject to marked discount on the basis of actual competitive tests. Under the mildest operating conditions, the operating economies of some refrigerators were found by test to differ by as much as two to one, while under more severe conditions they differ by over three to one. Furthermore, the efficiencies of some refrigerators diminish greatly during the several months of testing.

Is a mechanical refrigerator "safe?" Every one tested had a greater shock hazard than that tolerated by the Fundamental Safety Requirements of the Association of Edison Illuminating Companies (even the gas refrigerator, which had a light inside the box, was guilty). Most dangerous, however, are the chemicals used as refrigerants, for many of them are highly poisonous. That great benefactor of mankind, the manufacturer of the Gr-n-w, advertises that his refrigerant may safely be smelt, tasted, and exposed to a flame, but he somehow neglects to point out in his advertising that, in the presence of a flame, his methylene chloride may decompose into that pleasant war-gas, phosgene. It is significant that the repair-men of many refrigerator manufacturers are furnished with gas-masks by their employers. Consumers are not so protected by anyone as yet, but the

mechanical-kitchen age may eventually require even the cook to wear a gas-mask in self-protection.

"Gadgetry" seems to sell automobiles as readily as other items. It was not so long ago that Chrysler advertised its "octane selector" as a wonderful invention which would allow the driver to get the best performance from any sort of gasoline. Indeed, the year's sales campaign was centered upon this device. And what was this epoch-making discovery? Merely a spark lever inconveniently located under the hood. Other gadgets, which have largely gone the way of similar sales embellishments, are free-wheeling and the dash-controlled ride-adjuster.

A recent test of hot-water bottles, moving to another counter in our "National Store," showed considerable variation in durability. The best bottle, a "G-d---r 3" purchased for 20 cents at Woolworth's, cost \$0.0026 per day of the accelerated-life test, while the worst bottle cost \$0.049 per day or nearly 19 times as much. The best bottle cost 20 cents while some of the others ran as high as \$2.30, but this discrepancy between price and quality should be an old story to us by now.

I could go on in this same vein more or less indefinitely if it were not for lack of space. For those interested in pursuing the subject further, I'll recommend two excellent books to be found in the Main Library: "Your Money's Worth," and "100,000,000 Guinea Pigs." You'll find them chock full of interesting and thought provoking case studies.

There's another angle of the problem I want to mention. How many of you have had practical experience with the "shell game," I wonder? At least you know the principle: Three shells and a little ball—"The hand is quicker than the eye," "Ten bucks, gentlemen, you can't tell which shell the little ball's under now." The shell game was a great money-maker for the small-time circus in the old days; now it has become respectable and is used upon the modern yokel with considerable effect. Just note these figures:

In 1928 there were on the market in the United States:

- 10,000 brands of wheat flour,
- 4,500 brands of canned corn,
- 1,000 brands of packaged tea,
- 500 brands of mustard,

according to a member of the National Bureau of Standards. Furthermore, a survey of 5,000 families in Milwaukee in 1930 showed the following in use:

- 256 brands of tooth brushes,
- 164 brands of fountain pens,
- 93 brands of package butter,
- 67 brands of package noodles,
- 36 brands of steel wool.

Here's the modern shell game in operation. How can the customer tell the best brand among so many? Does he have as good a chance of getting his money's worth as does the sucker who's up against the three-shell game? I doubt it. Furthermore, someone has to pay

for all the unnecessary expense created by the excessive branding, advertising, and selling involved, and we can be sure it's the consumer who foots the bill.

The purpose of economic activity is to satisfy the wants of mankind in the most efficient manner. Consumption is the goal of production; it should see that producers manufacture the goods which are most urgently needed, yet most of us are the veriest greenhorns imaginable when the rational purchasing of goods is considered. Without rational purchasing, it is unlikely that the economic system will succeed in satisfying the wants of mankind in the most efficient manner. We fall for any ad that's centered on a picture of a pretty girl; we believe any statement that appears in print if; we think the most expensive article must of course be the best one. Does the business man follow this same beautifully trustful practice when he purchases for his own business? Not on your life. He hires a hard-boiled purchasing agent to insist upon specifications and facts based upon careful test, instead of upon pretty pictures and "unsolicited" testimonials.

High quality goods *can* be purchased at reasonable prices; deception, exaggeration, and plain buncomb *can* be eliminated from retail trade; consumers *can* have the benefit of data from testing laboratories and *can* get their "money's worth" if they will become purchasing agents who "must be shown" before they bite. In such a case, the economic system would have a better chance to perform its function satisfactorily. If consumers were rational buyers, a man's present income might easily purchase 25 per cent *more* goods or services than it now does; a goal for which it would be well worth striving. Let's all get off the sucker list. Let's all insist upon real truth in advertising; let's demand guarantees that really guarantee; let us stop being "rubes" and become "wise guys" who really know how to take care of ourselves.

I understand clothing is soon to be made out of paper. Consumers beware! If consumers in general continue to be suckers in the present mode, they're likely to lose in an even bigger and better way some day. Just imagine what will happen when the "guaranteed waterproof" paper suit gets in the rain—*then* the sucker will lose his pants as well as his shirt!